

A \$2 Billion Bomber Sits in the Wings

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By John Mintz
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The B-2 bomber, at \$2 billion per copy, is the most expensive airplane ever built and perhaps history's most intimidating combat aircraft. It's ready to fly in any upcoming air war against Iraq, but the U.S. military has revealed no plans for that. And therein lies a mystery that may reveal as much about internal Pentagon politics and budgetary tactics as military strategy, military and defense industry officials say.

Pentagon officials who favor the B-2's deployment in the Persian Gulf say some

military officers are afraid that if the airplane does well, its success could reopen discussion about building more than the 21 B-2s on order, threatening billions destined for the Air Force's currently prized project, the F-22 fighter. A poor performance, on the other hand, could be a humiliating and costly failure.

"If it does badly, and it crashes, you'd have a \$2 billion smoking hole in the desert, which could be a bit embarrassing," said one Air Force official. "Or if it does beautifully, there would be tremendous pressure to build more B-2s, and that undoubtedly would infringe on the budgets

of other Air Force airplanes that we want to build."

The Air Force officially denies that such considerations have a role in the decision whether to deploy the colossal black, bat-winged aircraft. The service's formal position is that "the B-2 has been declared operational and is available to the war fighters should it be called upon," said Capt. Leo Devine, a spokesman for the service.

But inside the Air Force and the secure Pentagon vaults where war plans are
See BOMBER, A16, Col. 1

By Walter Pincus
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Messages between Iranian intelligence officials describing an alleged CIA-financed plot to kill Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in early 1995 triggered an unusual FBI investigation into whether agency clandestine officers had violated a U.S. ban on involvement in political assassinations, according to active and retired intelligence officials.

The alleged assassination was said to have been part of a broader plan by Iraqi exiles and Kurds in northern Iraq to begin a military offensive that they hoped would lead to an uprising against the Iraqi leader, according to these sources. Although the CIA, through its case officers in northern Iraq, had been supporting Kurdish groups and Iraqi exiles in the Iraqi National Congress, U.S. officials said that they did not approve

the invasion plan nor support any plot to assassinate Saddam Hussein.

However, when intercepted Iranian messages discussing CIA assassination plots were reviewed by the National Security Council staff in early 1995, they were considered credible enough for the FBI to be ordered to investigate. The Iranian messages were intercepted by a Pentagon-based intelligence agency and turned over to the NSC, sources said.

Five CIA case officers were brought back from northern Iraq, interrogated and given polygraph tests by the FBI about the alleged assassination plot, according to a report in Sunday's Los Angeles Times. Other sources said the returning CIA officers were surprised and angered when they were met by FBI agents who informed them of their legal rights to an attorney and told them they were under investigation.

The agency officers eventually were cleared, according to sources. After a subsequent review by the CIA inspector general designed to evaluate whether their careers had been unjustly damaged, some were given commendations for their Iraq activities, according to agency sources. One of the officers turned down the award, according to a source.

CIA officials refused to comment on the record about the FBI investigation.

The incident added to already low morale within the agency's clandestine arm, the Directorate of Operations (DO), and increased resentment among older case officers toward the Clinton administration and particularly Anthony Lake, then head of the NSC staff, for what they believed were their critical views of covert activities. The DO was already in turmoil stemming from its failures in the case of confessed Soviet spy Aldrich H.

Ames and criticism for past activities in Central America.

A presidential finding approved by George Bush in 1991 authorized covert action against Iraq, including the support of military coups that could indirectly result in the death of Saddam Hussein. But a previous executive order, first signed by President Gerald R. Ford, bars U.S. employees or anyone acting on their behalf from engaging in or conspiring to engage in a plot specifically designed to result in an assassination.

Recently, the issue of assassinating Saddam Hussein has been raised by lawmakers and commentators who have urged the Clinton administration to take military measures to remove him from power.

Speaking of the 1995 case, one former top clandestine officer was sharply critical of the decision to begin a criminal investigation based in good part on Iranian messages,

which he said should not have been considered "plausible."

"When you work with exile groups," this officer said, "someone always talks of assassination and others pick it up. That doesn't mean they are really going to do it."

A second CIA operation directed at Iraq during 1994-1995 involved supporting exiled former members of the Iraqi military. Based in Amman, Jordan, the exiled officers were hoping to incite a coup in which the Iraqi leader would be removed from power. The CIA support for the efforts was not prevented by the executive order, because killing Saddam Hussein was not the aim of the coup, according to agency sources who pointed out that the House and Senate congressional committees had approved that plan.

Eventually the plotters were infiltrated by Iraqi security forces and the plan failed.